

## "Double Crap!" Abuse and Harmed Identity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Amy E. Bonomi, PhD, MPH,<sup>1,4</sup> Lauren E. Altenburger, BS,<sup>1</sup> and Nicole L. Walton, MSW<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

**Background:** While intimate partner violence (IPV) affects 25% of women and impairs health, current societal conditions—including the normalization of abuse in popular culture such as novels, film, and music—create the context to support such violence. *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a best-selling novel, depicts a "romantic" and "erotic" relationship involving 28-year-old megamillionaire, Christian Grey, and a 22-year-old college student, Anastasia Steele. We argue that the relationship is characterized by IPV, which is harmful to Anastasia.

**Methods:** All authors engaged in iterative readings of the text, and wrote narrative summaries to elucidate themes. Validity checks included double review of the first eight chapters of the novel to establish consistency in our analysis approach, iterative discussions in-person and electronically to arbitrate discrepancies, and review of our analysis with other abuse and sexual practice experts. To characterize IPV, we used the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's definitions of emotional abuse (intimidation/threats; isolation; stalking; and humiliation) and sexual violence (forced sex acts/contact against a person's will, including using alcohol/drugs or intimidation/pressure). To characterize harm, we used Smith's conceptualizations of perceived threat, managing, altered identity, yearning, entrapment, and disempowerment experienced by abused women.

**Results:** Emotional abuse is present in nearly every interaction, including: stalking (Christian deliberately follows Anastasia and appears in unusual places, uses a phone and computer to track Anastasia's whereabouts, and delivers expensive gifts); intimidation (Christian uses intimidating verbal and nonverbal behaviors, such as routinely commanding Anastasia to eat and threatening to punish her); and isolation (Christian limits Anastasia's social contact). Sexual violence is pervasive—including using alcohol to compromise Anastasia's consent, as well as intimidation (Christian initiates sexual encounters when genuinely angry, dismisses Anastasia's requests for boundaries, and threatens her). Anastasia experiences reactions typical of abused women, including: constant perceived threat ("my stomach churns from his threats"); altered identity (describes herself as a "pale, haunted ghost"); and stressful managing (engages in behaviors to "keep the peace," such as withholding information about her social whereabouts to avoid Christian's anger). Anastasia becomes disempowered and entrapped in the relationship as her behaviors become mechanized in response to Christian's abuse.

**Conclusions:** Our analysis identified patterns in *Fifty Shades* that reflect pervasive intimate partner violence—one of the biggest problems of our time. Further, our analysis adds to a growing body of literature noting dangerous violence standards being perpetuated in popular culture.

### Introduction

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) affects between 25% and 44% of women<sup>1,2</sup> and significantly compromises their physical and mental health.<sup>3–11</sup> Despite the high prevalence of IPV and adverse health impacts, underlying societal conditions create the context for such violence to occur,<sup>12</sup> including the normalization and romanticizing of violence in popular

culture (e.g., books, music, film).<sup>13–22</sup> For example, Eminem and Rihanna's music video—*Love the Way You Lie*<sup>23</sup>—romanticizes physical, sexual, and emotional threats, including an intent to kill (i.e., threats to burn down a house), within a couple's romantic relationship. The increasing inclusion of abuse in music videos<sup>20–22</sup> prompted a cautionary policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>21</sup> about the role that depictions of violence, sexual messages, sexual

Departments of <sup>1</sup>Human Sciences; <sup>2</sup>Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and <sup>3</sup>Sexuality Studies, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

stereotypes, and substance abuse play in behaviors and attitudes of young viewers. Feminist scholars Dines and DeKeseredy argue that similar images of violence in pornography—including choking, gagging, beating, and cutting women—have created unrealistic expectations around sex, including subjecting females to violent sexual acts.<sup>25,26</sup> In this manuscript, we undertook an in-depth analysis of abuse patterns in one of the Western world's most popular novel series—*Fifty Shades*.<sup>27-29</sup>

While there are few empirical studies that document harmful outcomes among readers of novels containing controversial content, scholars suggest that individuals regularly alter their real-world beliefs and attitudes in response to fictional communication.<sup>30-34</sup> Scholars specifically argue that stories are especially influential when readers become drawn into them and cognitive resources, emotions, and mental imagery faculties are engaged.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, while the harms of reading fiction have not been documented empirically, when libraries and schools ban books, the assumption is that fiction can have harmful effects on attitudes and beliefs.<sup>35-37</sup> One of the most popular literary series of all time—the *Twilight*<sup>38-40</sup> series—normalizes abuse within the context of a romantic relationship, including stalking, physical and sexual assault, emotional manipulation, threats, and intimidation.<sup>13,14</sup> Within the *Twilight*<sup>38-40</sup> series, Edward, a “breathtakingly handsome vampire,” is depicted as “an obsessed stalker with no interest or friends other than his family and Bella,” the female protagonist and his romantic focus (Borgia, pp. 4-5).<sup>13</sup> Edward routinely orders Bella around, growls, snarls, shouts, and uses aggressive looks and physical gestures, such as aggressively grabbing her; some of his physical control strategies cause bruising.<sup>13,14</sup>

Most recently, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy<sup>27-29</sup>—on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List for 50 weeks and counting—has been heralded as a means to liberating, erotic, and perverse sexual expression. The *Fifty Shades* trilogy has caused much public controversy, resulting in the book being banned in libraries across several U.S. states.<sup>11</sup> The trilogy—which comprises *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*—depicts a “romantic” and “erotic” BDSM (bondage/discipline-dominance/submission-sadism/masochism)<sup>42-46</sup> relationship involving 28-year-old megamillionaire Christian Grey and 22-year-old college student/recent graduate Anastasia Steele.<sup>27</sup> After meeting during an interview for Anastasia's college newspaper, the couple's relationship develops quickly; within 2 weeks, the couple has their first sexual encounter. Concerning in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is the perpetuation of problematic abuse patterns, consistent with those previously documented in the *Twilight* series<sup>38-40</sup> and other aspects of popular culture.

The *Fifty Shades* plot involves central tensions between BDSM practices and romance. As a general practice, BDSM can include a range of activities that may be played out within and outside of sexual contexts; typically the activities include aspects of power and pain, with consent (agreement about the activities from involved parties).<sup>46-48</sup> Within the context of consensual BDSM relationships, substance abuse negates consent, negotiations and contracts are taken seriously, and boundaries are respected.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, while there are variations in opinions about what constitutes “acceptable BDSM,” many involved in BDSM are uncomfortable with activities that perpetuate traditional gender role dynamics,

such as rape and domestic violence scenes.<sup>46</sup> In *Fifty Shades*, the couple's BDSM practices involve Christian as the “dominant” and Anastasia as the “submissive.” In sexual settings, Christian uses power and pain manipulations, such as restraint and physical punishment, which are both terrifying and exciting to Anastasia; as we will argue in this manuscript, Anastasia is coerced into these sexual activities. Christian also attempts power and pain exchanges in nonsexual settings, such as in the couple's interactions at restaurants and in e-mail correspondence. While Christian seems comfortable concentrating on and nurturing BDSM aspects of the relationship, claiming he is not a “hearts and flowers” guy (p. 110), Anastasia desires and values “romance”; her ideas about “romance” include envisioning Christian as one of the literary characters she has read about, for example, “he's not a dark knight at all but a white knight in shining, dazzling armor—a classic romantic hero—Sir Gawain or Sir Lancelot” (p. 69).<sup>27</sup>

The tensions between BDSM and romance are supported by characters with conflicting desires/standards for intimacy. Christian desires physical closeness, but only on his highly structured terms; Christian's moods are mercurial, and he desires ultimate control over Anastasia under the guise of BDSM practices. Anastasia desires a deeper emotional connection with Christian than she actually experiences in the relationship; she desires a “normal” relationship, meaning one that “doesn't need a 10-page agreement, a flogger, and carabiners in his playroom ceiling” (p. 199). To further nuance the couple's intimacy dynamic, Christian is a victim of both childhood neglect and physical abuse (up until age 4) and childhood sexual abuse (in adolescence), and whose birth mother died when he was age 4, resulting in his adoption by the Grey family; Christian has lingering trauma and intimacy obstructions associated with these experiences, including a tendency to avoid emotional intimacy.<sup>49-53</sup> Indeed, Christian has few friends and is not close to his adoptive family; Christian concentrates solely on his connection to Anastasia. Anastasia has a history of multiple fathers, including the death of her birth father—which suggests disruptions in her early life that could contribute to intimacy complications.

The trilogy has been heralded as triumphant for women because of the influence that “plain-looking” Anastasia has on the emotions and behaviors of “Greek god-like” Christian Grey,<sup>54</sup> including his sexual satisfaction and his ability to “love.” Anastasia is overly invested in Christian's needs,<sup>49,55</sup> is cast as “ordinary” (“I'm too pale, too skinny, too scruffy, uncoordinated, my long lists of faults go on” p. 51), yet possesses special sexual qualities (Anastasia is a virgin when she meets Christian, yet she sexually satisfies him). This parallels problematic intimacy and sexual standards depicted in the abusive relationship in the *Twilight* series. Borgia (2011), in a detailed analysis of the *Twilight* series, highlights the dynamic of “the breathtakingly handsome vampire Edward with a sexually charged tension that quickly leads to his complete domination of the young woman [Bella], which she eagerly embraces” (p. 4).<sup>13</sup>

Despite the widespread popularity of *Fifty Shades*, beyond BDSM,<sup>42-45</sup> concerning is the power imbalance in Christian and Anastasia's relationship, including behaviors consistent with those observed in chronically violent couples<sup>49,56-70</sup> and the significant adverse impacts of the abuse for Anastasia as experienced by abused women.<sup>70-72</sup> Using United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) definitions of intimate

## ABUSE AND HARM IN FIFTY SHADES

3

partner violence (IPV)<sup>63</sup> and Smith's conceptualizations of how abuse adversely impacts women.<sup>64-67</sup> we systematically analyzed *Fifty Shades of Grey*—the first novel in the trilogy—to identify and describe (1) patterns in Christian's behavior consistent with IPV; and (2) Anastasia's responses to Christian's behaviors that are consistent with women's abuse experiences.<sup>64-67</sup> Our focus on the first novel in the trilogy—which covers the first 4 weeks of Christian and Anastasia's relationship—is intended to elucidate patterns in the initial phases of an abusive relationship. While we concentrate on the first novel's text, abuse patterns are overarching themes in the second and third novels. Our analysis adds to a growing body of literature noting dangerous violence standards being perpetuated in popular culture.<sup>1,1-22</sup>

## Methods

All three authors read *Fifty Shades of Grey* and participated in the analysis. The analysis was led by the first author, an expert in qualitative methods and dynamics of violent couples.<sup>54,59,64</sup> The first author provided training and oversight in the documentation of themes undertaken by all three authors. Thematic analysis<sup>68</sup> was used to guide our multi-step analysis:

**Step 1:** We began by defining intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse-related harmed identity. To define aspects of IPV, which includes "physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse,"<sup>69</sup> we used the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's definitions.<sup>69</sup> Physical violence includes acts such as slapping, punching, biting, and choking; threats include using words or gestures to communicate intent to harm; sexual violence includes forced sex acts/contact against a person's will, including due to a person's inability to understand the act because of illness, disability, alcohol/drugs, or intimidation/pressure; and emotional abuse includes acts such as intimidation, humiliation, social isolation, withholding resources, and controlling what a person can and cannot do.<sup>69</sup> Stalking includes harassing or threatening behavior, such as making harassing phone calls, leaving written messages or objects, and appearing at a person's home or place of business.<sup>1,43</sup> To assess harmed identity to Anastasia, we used Smith's conceptualizations of identity changes experienced by abused women,<sup>64-67</sup> including: perceived threat (perceptions of impending harm); managing (direct action or inhibition of action to "keep the peace" in the relationship); altered identity (changed self-concept and loss of identity from images abusers reflect); yearning (futile attempts to establish intimacy with an abusive partner); entrapment (perceptions of being trapped in the relationship resulting from the abuser's control); and disempowerment (loss of power and habitual behavior modification from prolonged abuse exposure).

**Step 2:** To ensure consistency in our interpretations of the definitions of IPV and harmed identity, each author read and described themes in a narrative format from the first eight chapters of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (i.e., the first 124 pages), and posted the narratives in a password-protected website for review by all authors. We organized our analysis in a timeline format, highlighting in narrative summaries<sup>59,66</sup> events/interactions in the couple's relationship—such as their initial meeting during Anastasia's interview of Christian for her college's newspaper, and live first time Christian "stalks" Anastasia by casually "showing up" at the independent

hardware store where she works. We chose to summarize the couple's events in a narrative format, rather than "coding" each theme, in order to maintain the continuity and integrity of the couple's interactions and conversations, and to capture the context surrounding their violent events; this approach has been used in our previous qualitative studies involving violent couples' conversational interactions.<sup>54,59,64</sup> The narrative timeline was punctuated by IPV-consistent behaviors (using the CDC's definition of emotional abuse, stalking, and sexual violence)<sup>69</sup> and IPV responses (using Smith's descriptions of perceived threat, managing, altered identity, yearning, entrapment, and disempowerment).<sup>64-67</sup> Comparisons of themes in the first eight chapters were checked and arbitrated in weekly in-person meetings involving all authors, and when necessary, modifications were made to the narrative documentation.

**Step 3:** Once consistency in our interpretations was achieved, each author was assigned to document in narrative thematic fashion a segment of the book. Narrative summaries delineating themes were posted in the password-protected website. Themes were iteratively discussed, arbitrated, and clarified in weekly in-person meetings involving all authors and through electronic communication in between the in-person meetings.

**Step 4:** As additional validity steps—a critical component of qualitative/thematic analysis to ensure accuracy in interpretations<sup>68</sup>—we first asked two abuse experts and a literary scholar to read and provide feedback on our analysis (see acknowledgements); minor changes were made to improve the transparency of our interpretations. Then, after the manuscript was submitted for publication, all three authors presented the findings in multiple venues/audiences that included professionals versed in BDSM. The presentations included two seminar series within The Ohio State University, which drew professionals and students who work in the areas of BDSM and sexuality from the Sexuality Studies Program, the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program, and the Psychology Department. We also presented our findings at the Women's Health Congress in Washington, D.C., and in two large undergraduate lectures at The Ohio State University, which included students living BDSM lifestyles. Finally, in revising our manuscript, the peer reviewers provided significant feedback to help further clarify our argument.

## Results

*Intimate partner violence patterns*

Our results distill the abuse patterns across Christian and Anastasia's 4-week relationship in the first novel, concentrating first on underlying emotional abuse patterns, and then on how the emotional abuse affects Anastasia, and culminating with a description of example sexual encounters that meet the CDC's sexual violence definition.<sup>69</sup> We begin by discussing emotional abuse, because this type of abuse permeates all chronically violent partnerships, including nearly every interaction of Christian and Anastasia's relationship; the underlying emotional abuse in Christian and Anastasia's relationship also sets the stage for sexual violence to occur. To remain consistent with literary convention, we describe events in the present tense; "actual dialogue" between Christian and Anastasia is represented using italics and quotations, and Anastasia's "inner dialogue" is in quotations only.

*Emotional/psychological abuse*

Christian controls all aspects of the couple's relationship using the emotional abuse tactics of stalking, isolation, intimidation/threats, and humiliation.<sup>61</sup> Emotional abuse begins immediately after the couple's first meeting when Anastasia interviews Christian for her college's newspaper, and continues through the couple's last interaction in the novel. Below we review three emotional abuse scenes; in each scene, the various types of emotional abuse co-occur and overlap, as is typically seen in abusive relationships.<sup>1,2</sup> As an important caveat before describing the emotional abuse scenes, while BDSM can include power and pain exchanges outside of the bedroom (such as ordering a partner to eat or threatening to punish/harm), typically such exchanges involve consenting parties (those who have agreed to the power exchange) and those who have worked out an egalitarian process for negotiating such power exchanges.<sup>46-48</sup> Within Christian and Anastasia's relationship, consent and egalitarian negotiation processes are not formally decided, and Christian uses a range of coercive strategies to control multiple aspects of Anastasia's behavior; as we will document, Christian's coercive control significantly erodes Anastasia's identity.

**Emotional abuse example 1.** Within a week after Christian and Anastasia's introduction during an interview Anastasia conducts with Christian for her college's newspaper, and without any additional form of communication, Christian stalks Anastasia, by "appearing" at Anastasia's place of employment, an independent hardware store located in Portland—173 miles from their original encounter in Seattle. As Christian asks Anastasia to help him locate various "odd items," such as cable ties, masking tape, and rope, his "confusing double talk" (p. 29) and questions about "what else he might need" for his "do-it-yourselfer" home improvement project (p. 28) creates feelings of embarrassment and humiliation in Anastasia. Christian does not stop his innuendo after Anastasia's body shows physiological signs of embarrassment, including a "recurring blush" and cheeks the color of the "Communist Manifesto" (p. 27–28). During this interaction, Anastasia even has the "uncanny feeling [Christian] is laughing at [her]" (p. 27). Midway through the hardware store encounter, Christian's mood changes suddenly from "friendly" to "cold and distant" when Anastasia says hello to a male colleague; Christian "watches [Anastasia] like a hawk, his eyes hooded, his mouth a hard impassive line...his tone becomes clipped and cool..." (p. 30–31). In response to Christian's abrupt mood change, Anastasia worries "Damn...have I offended him" and attempts to "diffuse the antagonism" by introducing Christian to her male colleague (p. 30–31). Christian's anger and withdrawal during the hardware store interaction set the stage for future isolation of Anastasia from friends and family—specifically, his anger/withdrawal over Anastasia talking to a male colleague is an intimidation/threat intended to induce her withdrawal from connections with others. Later in the novel, after returning home from a night out with her friends, Anastasia finds an e-mail, five missed calls, and a voice message, in which Christian warns that she needs "to learn to manage [his] expectations" and he is not a "patient man" (p. 304). Anastasia panics in response and calls him immediately to express herself:

"Double crap. Will he ever give me a break... He is suffocating me. With a deep dread uncurling in my stomach, I scroll down to his number and press 'call'... He'd probably like to beat seven shades of shit out of me. The thought is depressing." (p. 304–305). As will be documented later, Anastasia begins to withhold information about her social whereabouts and her travel plans to visit her mother to avoid Christian's anger and ensuing consequences—a behavioral pattern that is pervasive in victims involved abusive relationships.<sup>49-52</sup>

**Emotional abuse example 2.** A few days after the hardware store encounter—during which Christian learned that Anastasia's primary interests are "British literature...the classics" (p. 28)—Christian tracks down Anastasia's home address and mails original volumes of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (value, \$14,000) to her as a form of stalking. Within the CDC's definitional framework, gifts are used to stalk by means of reminding the victim of the abuser's presence and control.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the expensive original volumes of *Tess* cause Anastasia to feel uncomfortable, as she asks Christian several times why he sent the books and even admits to her best friend, "It's a completely over-the-top gift. I can't accept it" (p. 161). Christian includes a foreboding quote from the book, "Why didn't you tell me there was danger? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to guard against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks" (p. 54), that baffles and causes Anastasia to feel emotional distress. After receiving the *Tess* books, later that evening Anastasia "drunk dials" Christian from a night club to ask why he sent the books. Christian tracks the location of Anastasia's cell phone and stalks her at the nightclub immediately after she "drunk dials" him, arriving just in time to "save" Anastasia from José, a friend who tries to kiss her while she is intoxicated. Upon seeing Christian, Anastasia is "swamped with shame and disgust," vomits, and even wonders how Christian found her as she questions, "Is it legal? Stalker?" (p. 62). After Anastasia passes out at the club, Christian isolates her by bringing her back to the hotel where he is staying, rather than taking her home to her apartment. Anastasia is alarmed when she wakes the next morning; she realizes she has been undressed, but she does not know where she is or who she is with (p. 66). When she realizes she is with Christian, she wonders if they had sex: "We didn't—?" (p. 66). In response, Christian humiliates Anastasia: "You were comatose. Necrophilia is not my thing" (p. 66), and intimidates/threatens: "If you were mine, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday...you didn't eat, you got drunk, you put yourself at risk" (p. 67). Christian further sets the stage for Anastasia's isolation from friends and family by repeatedly reminding her that José put her at risk by "[getting] out of line" through his attempts to kiss her (p. 68). Anastasia reflects to herself: "Oh, he's laughing at me, the bastard. I didn't ask for him to come and get me. Somehow I've been made to feel the villain of the piece" (p. 66).

**Emotional abuse example 3.** Later in the novel, Anastasia has serious second thoughts about her arrangement with Christian and travels to visit her mother in Georgia to distance herself from the situation (p. 354). Anastasia is disturbed and perplexed over Christian's ongoing pressure for her to agree to the sex practices in his BDSM contract. To protect and isolate Anastasia, Christian bumps Anastasia's airline seat up to first class, where the seat next to her is mysteriously

## ABUSE AND HARM IN FIFTY SHADES

5

unoccupied; this is a form of stalking in that Christian identifies Anastasia's flight and reminds her of his presence and control over her through an upgrade to first class. Anastasia is "alarmed" that Christian knows which flight she is on and tells him that his *"stalking knows no bounds"* (p. 389). Once on the airplane, with comfortable distance from Christian and knowing she will not be harmed, Anastasia messages him that she had a massage at the airport by a male masseuse. As the airplane pulls away from the gate, Anastasia peeks at her BlackBerry to find an intimidating/threatening response from Christian: *"I know what you're trying to do—and trust me, you've succeeded. Next time you'll be in the cargo hold, bound and gagged in a crate"* (p. 392). Anastasia is alarmed and pleads with Christian to not be angry with her; once she lands in Georgia, she sends a longer email, detailing her fear: *"You can't torture...that to me—bound and gagged in a crate. That scares me. You scare me"* (p. 394). When the distance Anastasia creates by traveling to Georgia becomes unbearable, Christian strategically intimidates/threatens Anastasia by telling her he is having dinner with "an old friend" (a prior sexual partner); Christian then stalks and further intimidates Anastasia, by flying 2600 miles in his private jet from Seattle to Georgia and "appearing" at the bar where she and her mother are having drinks. Upon realizing that Christian is at the bar, Anastasia looks like she has "seen a ghost" (p. 418), and reflects "I have neglected to tell my mother about Christian's stalking tendencies" (p. 418). When Anastasia's mother excuses herself to use the bathroom, Christian and Anastasia argue, and Christian retreats to his hotel room, which results in isolating Anastasia from her mother, as Anastasia follows him to his room. The following morning, Christian arranges a surprise gliding trip at the Brunswick Soaring Association airfield for himself and Anastasia (p. 449), another strategic move to isolate her. Later that day, Christian abruptly announces he needs to return to Seattle, with no explanation provided—causing Anastasia great worry, which impairs her ability to enjoy the remaining time with her mother.

In summary, the three situations we described here exemplify the chronic, overlapping emotional/psychological abuse types permeating nearly every encounter and aspect of Christian and Anastasia's relationship. Christian routinely stalks and attempts to isolate Anastasia by creating situations in which Anastasia is separated from friends and family, and providing gifts (e.g., Tess bonks, upgrade of airline seat to first class). While providing gifts may not be the first thing that comes to mind in defining "stalking," it is an important component used in an overarching dynamic to control victims—hence its inclusion in the CDC's definition;<sup>63</sup> in our own analysis of real-world violent couples, one abuser delivered a hundred dollar bill to the victim's apartment, to remind the victim of his control over her.<sup>64</sup> Christian also intimidates and humiliates Anastasia by reminding her of transgressions she has committed (e.g., having a massage by a male masseuse) and threatening her with severe recourse (e.g., binding and gagging her in a crate). Other notable instances of intimidation occur throughout the novel, such as Christian's routine threats to punish Anastasia for rolling her eyes, his castigations over her eating behaviors (*"Eat what's on your plate. If you'd eaten properly yesterday, you wouldn't be here..."* p. 75), and his intimidation over birth control, including coercing Anastasia to see "his" gynecologist to "sort out" birth control. Again, while BDSM can include power and

pain exchanges outside of the bedroom (e.g., ordering a partner to eat), typically these exchanges involve consenting parties and those who have worked out an egalitarian negotiation process.<sup>65–66</sup> The interlocking pattern of control used by Christian—including stalking, intimidation, isolation, and humiliation—begin before the couple even establishes a connection, in Christian's initial stalking of Anastasia at the hardware store. This early example of stalking, intimidation, humiliation, and isolation sets the couple up for a gross power imbalance in their relationship, which continues throughout their interactions. Later, at a dinner, Christian orders Anastasia to "eat," monitors her food intake (*"Three oysters, four bites of cod, and one asparagus stalk, no potatoes, no nuts, no olives, and you've not eaten all day. You said I could trust you"* p. 223) and pressures her about the BDSM parameters. In response to Christian's pressure about the BDSM arrangement, Anastasia "feels railroaded" (p. 220) and takes a "large sip of wine" (p. 220); as further evidence of her discomfort, she accuses Christian of "[using] sex as a weapon" (p. 224) and not "[fighting] fair" (p. 225), and after leaving dinner, "tears [stream] down [her] face" and she feels "overwhelmed" (p. 229).

## Response to underlying emotional abuse

Anastasia's reaction to Christian's coercive, manipulative strategies are consistent with those of battered women, including perceived threat (perceptions of impending harm); managing (direct action or inhibition of action to "keep the peace"); altered identity (changed self-concept/loss of identity from images abusers reflect); yearning (futile attempts to establish intimacy with an abusive partner); entrapment (perceptions of being trapped in the relationship resulting from abuser's control); and disempowerment (loss of power and habitual behavior modification from prolonged exposure to abuse and to fit abuser's desires).<sup>66</sup> Again, as an important caveat before explaining Anastasia's reactions to Christian, consensual BDSM relationships involve an egalitarian exchange of power negotiations.<sup>67–68</sup> While discomfort might be experienced by both parties in the relationship when negotiations take place, in consenting relationships, one party's identity should not be uniformly adversely affected over the entire course of the relationship.

**Perceived threat.** Nearly every interaction with Christian involves Anastasia feeling a sense of "threat." Anastasia chronically feels "threat" over Christian's jealousy—such as when he angers/intimidates because Anastasia's male colleague says hello (*"When I glance up at Christian Grey, he's watching us like a hawk...He's changed from the weirdly attentive costumer to someone else—cold and distant"* p. 30). In the email exchange on Anastasia's trip to visit her mother in Georgia, she writes that Christian's idea of her being bound and gagged in the cargo section of the plane *"...scares me...you scare me...what you are offering is erotic and sexy...but I am also scared you will hurt me—physically and emotionally...[I don't want to end up] black and blue"* (p. 394–395). When the couple readies for their first interaction in the BDSM playroom, Anastasia reflects: *"Holy cow. He wants to hurt me...how do I deal with this...I can't hide the horror on my face"* (p. 317) and also *"He's dangerous to my health...part of me wants to run screaming"* (p. 101). Anastasia routinely feels threatened over Christian's stalking tendencies: *"Christian ordered me*

to take my Blackberry and Mac...he likes control over everything, including me...jeez, I'm only going to be gone for a few days; he's acting like I'm going for a few weeks. He always keeps me off balance" (p. 378). Finally, Anastasia is constantly worrying about what kind of mood Christian will be in: "A thousand butterflies stretch their wings and flutter erratically in my stomach...why am I so nervous...it's because I have no idea what kind of mood Christian's going to be in when I arrive...my subconscious is fraught with nerves" (p. 478). Anastasia does not enjoy that Christian "keeps her off balance" (p. 378), she is "horrified" (p. 317) that Christian wants to hurt her, and she is terrified of his moods (p. 478).

**Managing.** Anastasia manages "perceived threat" by altering her behavior to keep peace in the relationship. The earliest example is when Anastasia attempts to "diffuse the antagonism" (i.e., Christian's anger and withdrawal) by introducing Christian to her male colleague during the hardware store interaction (p. 30). Over time, Anastasia withholds information about other interactions with friends and family, and begins to avoid social outings, to avoid Christian's anger. For example, she delays sharing of her plans to attend her friend Jose's upcoming photography show because she knows Christian will be upset; indeed, Christian's response to Anastasia's revelation of the photography event is cool and controlling (he insists on flying them in his helicopter to the event). When details about her trip to visit her mother in Georgia catch Christian by surprise and anger him, Anastasia attempts to temper Christian's anger by reassuring, "I'm not leaving, I'm going to see my mother, and I was only thinking about it..." (p. 339). As will be described in the sexual violence section, Anastasia routinely participates in sexual activities she is uncomfortable with to diffuse Christian's anger. For example, Anastasia is upset about Christian's graduation gift of an Audi A-3 (retail, \$30,000) and is threatened by his angry response: Christian: "It's taking all my self-control not to fuck you on the hood of this car...if I want to buy you a fucking car, I'll buy you a fucking car...now let's get you inside and naked," and Anastasia: "You scare me when you're angry" (p. 262). Yet, Anastasia participates in sex, to diffuse the mounting tension, lamenting internally: "Another mercurial mood swing; it's so hard to keep up" (p. 263). Anastasia further manages her behaviors in response to Christian's relentless castigations regarding food. Because of Christian's early years as a starving child, he "[has] issues with wasted food" and frequently commands Anastasia to "eat" (p. 130). In response to Christian's behavior, Anastasia is puzzled and frustrated, wondering "Holy crap. What is that all about?" (p. 131). She decides to manage her behavior in the future and tells herself, "I must remember not to put so much on my plate if he's going to be weird about food" (p. 131). According to Smith's framework,<sup>61-62</sup> agreeing to engage in activities that are uncomfortable, or modifying behaviors to "keep the peace," are patterns consistently observed in victims involved in abusive relationships.

**Altered identity.** Anastasia's identity becomes dependent upon the intimidation and abuse Christian projects onto her. After their first sexual encounter, Anastasia begins losing her sense of clarity when she admits how frustrated she is, "Oh, this is so confusing. I have to try to categorize and analyze my feelings for Christian Grey" (p. 126). As their relationship

continues developing, Anastasia's bewilderment, confusion, and loss of self do not cease. After their formal dinner to negotiate the terms of the BDSM contract, Anastasia enters her car and cries: "Soon tears are streaming down my face, and I don't understand why I'm crying. I was holding my own...He wants me...I need him to want me like I want and need him...deep down I know that's not possible. I am just overwhelmed" (p. 229). Before a formal contract is negotiated, Anastasia is spanked 18 times for rolling her eyes at Christian. After this incident, Anastasia is confused and admits to herself that she "can't say that [she] enjoyed the experience. In fact, [she] would still go a long way to avoid it..." (p. 277). After Christian leaves, Anastasia begins processing her reaction: "I close the door and stand helpless...a place I have lived happily for almost four years...yet today, for the first time ever, I feel lonely and uncomfortable here, unhappy with my own company. Have I strayed so far from who I am?...What am I doing?" (p. 278). Being involved in BDSM relationship can invoke similar feelings of discomfort and questioning one's identity;<sup>63-65</sup> however, as Christian and Anastasia's BDSM relationship is coerced through Christian's controlling strategies, Anastasia's discomfort is related to the abuse she experiences. For example, after Anastasia is first spanked, she calls her mom and cries, sees her best friend Kate and cries, and remembers what Christian said at the hotel ("Well, if you were mine you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday" p. 67). She even realizes, "All the warning signs were there, I was just too clueless and too enamored to notice" (p. 280). Later, in her reflections, Anastasia realizes: "I've never been hit in my life. What have I gotten myself into?...I have fallen for someone who's so emotionally shut down, I will only get hurt—deep down I know this—someone who is by his own admission is completely fucked up...I don't want him to beat me, is that so unreasonable...?" (p. 284-286).

**Yearning.** As Smith indicates, yearning for connection to a partner is typical in all romantic/intimate relationships, whether violent or nonviolent; however, in violent relationships, yearning takes on an "aura of desperation by virtue of inconsistent reciprocity and abuse."<sup>66-67</sup> Anastasia's "yearning" to establish intimacy and a "normal" relationship with Christian is seen in nearly every interaction, and in her self-reflections. Anastasia's idea of a "normal" relationship is one where her partner exhibits the qualities of her favorite literary heroes. Yet, at the same time, she yearns for basic intimacy, such as sleeping in the same bed with Christian. When Christian departs after a night of sex, Anastasia writes in an email that she is disappointed that he never stays with her. Christian returns 20 minutes later, with no advance warning, and bursts into Anastasia's apartment to stay (p. 285); however, despite Anastasia's stated request/desire for intimacy, Christian dismisses Anastasia and commands her to turn and face away from him in the bed. In a similar encounter, Anastasia begs Christian to tell her why he does not like to be touched; rather than meet Anastasia in conversation about her need, he bargains with her: "I am going to put these [silver balls] inside of you, and then I'm going to spank you, not for punishment, but for your pleasure and mine...then, we'll fuck, and if you're still awake, I'll impart some information about my formative years. Agreed?" (p. 362). After spanking and "fucking" Anastasia, Christian is annoyed that Anastasia still wants

## ABUSE AND HARM IN FIFTY SHADES

7

to discuss "the touching" issue; she admits feeling "short-changed" (p. 366). Christian ends the conversation abruptly: "Miss Steele, you sure know how to ruin a moment...the woman who brought me into this world was a crack whore...go to sleep." (p. 366-367). Similar types of interactions occur throughout the novel, with Anastasia engaging in behaviors she hopes will lead the couple toward normalized interactions: perhaps the riskiest is when Anastasia yearns to guide Christian "into the light" by agreeing to endure his severe punishment of being beaten with a belt (p. 504). This latter agreement to be beaten with a belt could also be viewed as an extension of the ways in which Anastasia "manages" by agreeing to activities she is uncomfortable with to keep peace and/or maintain the relationship.

**Entrapment.** Anastasia and Christian's relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is just under a month, yet Anastasia feels extreme pressure to maintain her arrangement with him. Unable to bear the thought of being alone, Christian employs strategies to "trap" Anastasia, including keeping his violent tendencies private, limiting Anastasia's availability of help and support from her friends and family through his non-disclosure agreement and through verbal and nonverbal intimidation, and attempts to convince Anastasia that she finds his punishments pleasurable. After Anastasia's first sexual experience with Christian, she reaches for her phone to "hear Kate's voice." A paranoid Christian "clenches" his jaw and with "one long, cold look at [Anastasia]," and eyes that "burn[ed]," chillingly warns, "I don't like to share, Miss Steele. Remember that" (p. 148). This reaction leaves Anastasia wondering, "Holy crap. I just wanted to call Kate...but his sudden aloofness has left me paralyzed" (p. 148). Later, when Anastasia details her discomfort with being punished, Christian admits, "I need you to behave in a certain way, and if you don't, I shall punish you, and you will learn to behave in the way I desire" (p. 287). When a baffled Anastasia responds that she feels "confused," Christian closes his eyes and tries to convince Anastasia that "[she was] sexually aroused by it [the spanking]" and that "contrary to what [her] roommate believe[s], [he is] not a princip monster" even asking, "Do I intimidate you that much?" (p. 288). In a later email, Anastasia explains, "You wanted to know why I felt confused after you—which euphemism should we apply—spanked, punished, bent, assaulted me. Well, during the whole alarming process, I felt demeaned, debased, and abused" (p. 292), to which Christian responds that a real submissive would "embrace these feelings, deal with them, for [him]" (p. 293). As Anastasia's discomfort grows, Christian senses her evolving hesitation and strategically expels information about his dark past. This effective manipulation strategy allows Anastasia to rationalize Christian's abusive tactics to be a result of his troubled past; she becomes entrapped because she feels it is her duty to "soothe him, join him briefly in the darkness and bring him into the light" (p. 504). She recognizes that the BDSM feels so "wrong" but decides "It's right for Christian. It's what he wants...I have to man up and take whatever he decides he wants, whatever he thinks he needs" (p. 454). Anastasia even admits to Christian, "I do it for you...because you need it...But when you want to punish me, I worry that you'll hurt me" (p. 503). While some might argue that Anastasia could "walk away" from the situation, the interlocking emotional abuse strategies Christian uses (stalking, intimidation, isolation, and humiliation) serve to entrap and

disempower Anastasia, including inhibiting/constraining her actions. During the final scene of the novel, Anastasia is beaten with a belt. Shocked by Christian's cruelty, Anastasia is overwhelmed with emotion, "I am so mad, scalding tears spill down my cheeks, and I brush them furiously aside" (p. 506). Despite numerous pleas from Christian for Anastasia to stay, she realizes how deeply incompatible they are after the belt beating. Immediately upon exiting the door to Christian's apartment, "embarrassment and shame wash over [her]" as she feels like a "failure" admitting, "I had hoped to drag my Fifty Shades into the light..." (p. 513). In the second novel, it is revealed that Anastasia could not last longer than three days without communication from Christian. Her cessation of the relationship is only a temporary break, providing further evidence to how deeply entrapped Christian held Anastasia.

**Disempowerment.** Anastasia feels increasingly disempowered in response to Christian's abuse; over time, Anastasia's behaviors become habitually modified to accommodate Christian's desires. After Anastasia is shown the "Red Room of Pain" (p. 132), Christian takes her to the kitchen for a snack. Christian commands Anastasia to sit. Taken aback, Anastasia realizes, "If I'm going to do this I'm going to have to get used to it. I realize he's been this bossy since I met him" (p. 102). Not long after Christian and Anastasia's first sexual encounter, Christian takes Anastasia to a restaurant where, in a threatening tone, he commands her to eat, even though she is not hungry (p. 155). Uncomfortable with Christian's controlling tactics, Anastasia asks him, "Is this what our, er...relationship will be like...you ordering me around," to which Christian responds, "Yes" (p. 155). As the couple's relationship progresses, Anastasia's disempowerment grows. When Anastasia rolls her eyes at Christian, he spansks her 18 times, during which Anastasia describes her loss of power, "He hits me again...this is getting harder to take...and he hits me again and again. From somewhere deep inside, I want to beg him to stop. But I don't" (p. 275). While a typical BDSM sexual encounter is characterized by a submissive and dominant, Christian takes advantage of Anastasia's disempowerment during many of their sexual encounters by pushing her to her limits and punishing her if she is not compliant with his demands. For instance, after a long BDSM sexual experience in the playroom, Anastasia is "utterly spent and fighting an overwhelming desire to sleep" (p. 325). As Anastasia obliges to Christian's order to kneel by the door, she is "shaky and very, very tired, momentarily confused" and begins to fall asleep (pp. 326-330). Dissatisfied with Anastasia's behavior, Christian commands her to hold her hands "as if [she's] praying" (p. 326) to which Anastasia thinks "Praying for you to go easy on me" (p. 327) but does as told. While some might argue that Anastasia's disempowered reaction is part of the play involved in a BDSM relationship, Anastasia's confusion and exhaustion indicate a reaction to Christian's perpetration inconsistent with current knowledge of BDSM. In Cutler's study of BDSM practices among couples, one submissive reminisces about her first BDSM experience saying, "And he spanked me with his hand on my butt and I loved it. A lot!"<sup>67</sup> Another submissive in Cutler's study remembered, "I believe all I actually did was cross dress for her, and I believe she spanked me. It was wonderful to realize the fantasies."<sup>68</sup> These expressions of enjoyment and pleasure within the constraints of the BDSM relationship are not consistent with



Anastasia's reaction to encounters with Christian, suggesting that Christian's manipulation tactics and emotional abuse coerce Anastasia into a harmful, unsatisfying relationship and, ultimately, result in her disempowerment.

#### Sexual violence

Sexual violence is pervasive across the couple's 13 sexual encounters—including Christian's use of alcohol to compromise Anastasia's consent and his use of intimidation (Christian initiates sexual encounters when angry, and dismisses Anastasia's boundaries). Again, within the context of consensual BDSM relationships, the use of alcohol, drugs, or other substances negates consent, and boundaries are respected even when boundaries are being pushed.<sup>16</sup>

**Sexual violence example 1.** The first sex scene occurs at Christian's condominium 2 weeks into the relationship. Christian sets up the sex scene by offering Anastasia generous amounts of wine (which she accepts) and engaging her in a discussion of the BDSM contract. During their discussion of the contract, Christian learns that Anastasia is a virgin, instantly angers, and intimidates/threatens, "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" (p. 108). Christian paces, while Anastasia is alarmed and whispers "Why are you so angry with me?" (p. 110). Sensing Anastasia's withdrawal over his concerns that she is a virgin, Christian quickly suggests he is angry at himself and that he should "teach her the basics" (p. 110) about sex. Christian asks Anastasia if she wants to leave (manipulation because it gives Anastasia the illusion she has control alter he induces a tense situation that causes her distress), and then tells her he likes having her there, he wants to bite her lip hard, and they should "forget about the [BDSM contract] rules" (p. 111) reinforced with:

*"I want you... and I know you want me... you wouldn't be sitting here calmly discussing punishment and hard limits if you didn't" (p. 111).*

Christian further primes Anastasia by suggesting "I really want to make love to you... you are one brave woman... I'm in awe of you... please let me make love to you" (p. 111). But, at the same time, he intimidates/warns, "... this doesn't mean I've come over all hearts and flowers... it's a means to an end" (p. 110–111). Christian asks Anastasia to show him how she "pleasures [her]self," (p. 114) and "fucks [penetrates] her hard:" "... he pounds on, picking up speed, merciless, a relentless rhythm" (p. 117). Christian penetrates Anastasia a second time from behind, claiming sexual ownership of Anastasia and intimidating/ordering her to "come:"

*"You are mine. Only mine. Don't forget it... I'm going to take you from behind... I want you sore, baby... every time you move tomorrow, I want you to be reminded that I've been here. Only me. You are mine. You. Are. Mine. Come for me, baby" (p. 119–121).*

As a critical reminder, this sex scene constitutes the couple's very first sexual intercourse; while this type of "play" (e.g., Christian asking Anastasia to masturbate and commanding her to "come") might occur later on in a BDSM relationship, the early and immediate use of alcohol to impair Anastasia's consent and the use of intimidation/pressure while Christian is genuinely angry at Anastasia for not disclosing that she is a virgin is inconsistent with consensual BDSM relationship practices.<sup>16</sup> As well, this initial intimidating sex, coupled with Christian's use of emotional abuse throughout the relation-

ship, sets the stage for future instances of nonegalitarian sexual interactions.

**Sexual violence example 2.** The fourth sex scene occurs the evening of Anastasia's college graduation ceremony approximately 3 weeks into the relationship. Christian and Anastasia had recently exchanged lengthy e-mails and conversation about the BDSM contract, including Christian pressing Anastasia at her graduation ceremony about whether she intended to sign the contract. Immediately prior to the sex scene, Christian and Anastasia exchange emails about how great Anastasia looked at graduation, and Christian offers to come to Anastasia's apartment. Christian arrives with a bottle of champagne and Anastasia instantly wonders, "Is he getting me tipsy?" (p. 253); Christian later admits to getting her tipsy on purpose (p. 271). Intimidation occurs throughout an elaborate review of the BDSM contract. When Anastasia sets limits regarding anal intercourse, Christian intimidates ("I'll agree to the [no] fisting but I'd really like to claim your ass... your ass will need training" p. 256) and humiliates ("I don't mean to laugh... you're just so inexperienced" p. 257). Later in the conversation, Christian manipulates Anastasia by offering to spend one additional night per week with her, on the condition that she accepts his graduation gift (an Audi A-3, value: \$30,000). When Anastasia becomes angry about the gift, Christian intimidates:

*Christian: "It's taking all my self-control not to fuck you on the hood of this car right now, just to show you that you are mine, and if I want to buy you a fucking car, I'll buy you a fucking car. Now let's get you inside and get naked."*

*Anastasia: "You scare me when you're angry."*

*Christian: "Turn around, I want to get you out of that dress." (p. 262–263)*

Thus, this sex scene also involves alcohol to impair Anastasia's consent (including Christian's direct confession of his intention to get her tipsy) and anger/intimidation, which causes Anastasia distress.

**Sexual violence example 3.** Similarly, the seventh sex scene involves alcohol and Christian's anger/intimidation. During a dinner party at Christian's parent's house, Christian and Anastasia drink copious amounts of wine, and Christian genuinely angers upon learning that Anastasia plans to visit her mother in Georgia and that she had drinks with José (her friend) to celebrate graduation. Christian intimidates/threatens Anastasia, while clenching his jaw and narrowing his eyes ("When were you going to tell me you were leaving" p. 339; "This conversation is not over" p. 340; and "[I am] palpitatingly mad," p. 341). Christian further intimidates Anastasia by moving his hand between her legs underneath the dinner table; Anastasia's body "tightens in response" and she worries "not here, not now... I reach for my wine in desperation" (p. 343). Again, while Christian moving his hand between Anastasia's legs could be part of BDSM "play," this move is done when Anastasia's consent is impaired and when Christian is genuinely furious at her for "leaving him" (visit to see her mother and drinks with José). After dinner, Christian "scoops" Anastasia over his shoulder and takes her to his parent's boathouse, where he details his anger, threatens to spank her, and "fucks" her:



poorly, relationship intimacy either decreased or increased, whereas people whose BDSM went well always experienced an increase in intimacy.<sup>44</sup> We did not formally analyze "intimacy" in Christian and Anastasia's relationship, yet our analysis shows Anastasia's yearning for a deeper intimacy than she seems to experience in the relationship.

Moreover, Christian's manipulations of Anastasia into sexual interactions that are uncomfortable for her are inconsistent with what is known about consensual BDSM relationships, which involve reciprocal agreement, and sometimes a contract to ensure limits are respected.<sup>45-47</sup> While Christian tries to convince Anastasia to sign a contract to be his submissive, she is uncomfortable every step of the way and ultimately never agrees; negotiations in the couple's relationship are not balanced. Christian first stalked, intimidated, isolated, and humiliated Anastasia at the hardware store merely days after the newspaper interview and when no communication had occurred in between. This early example of stalking sets the couple up for a gross power imbalance in their relationship, which continues through the first novel. The abusive dynamic has a clearly adverse impact on Anastasia; for example, she sobs on multiple occasions after the couple's interactions. In the last scene of the novel, Christian beats Anastasia with a belt; she is horrified, struggles to get away, and says, "You are one fucked-up son of a bitch" (p. 506). Anastasia chooses to leave, including ending the relationship; she reflects internally, "I did follow my heart and I have a sore ass and an anguished, broken spirit to show for it..." (p. 507-508). Just before Anastasia leaves, she gazes at herself in the mirror and sees "a pale haunted ghost...eyelids [swollen from] crying..." and further reflects, "I cannot believe that my world is crumbling around me into a sterile pile of ashes, all my hopes and dreams cruelly dashed" (p. 511).

Our analysis shows perpetuation of abuse in one of the Western world's most popular novels. Scholars suggest that individuals regularly alter their real-world beliefs and attitudes in response to fictional communication.<sup>30-34</sup> According to the *Huffington Post*, *Fifty Shades* has been banned in public libraries in several U.S. states,<sup>41</sup> suggesting widespread perceptions that the novel may be harmful to readers. The banning of *Fifty Shades* in libraries is in part linked to the graphic sexual content, which some have described as semi-pornographic and not suiting of community standards.<sup>41</sup> As moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes, intuitive reactions and judgments of "harmless taboo" sexual acts—such as pornography—are often rooted in deeply held moral beliefs concerning the violation of proper social/moral order and potential harm that may befall the sexual actors.<sup>42</sup> Concerning is that the banning of *Fifty Shades* in public libraries seems centrally linked to issues of semi-pornographic content, rather than to the pervasive underlying abuse patterns we documented in Christian and Anastasia's relationship; thus, while some are resisting the troubling dynamics in *Fifty Shades* through banning it from libraries, it appears the abuse has been glossed over in these efforts. This suggests, in part, a continued underlying societal tolerance of abuse.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors thank Cynthia Burack, Christin Carotta, and Julianna Nemeth of The Ohio State University for providing feedback on the manuscript and/or ideas presented in the

manuscript prior to submission. Additionally, we are grateful to the peer reviewers of our manuscript, who provided significant feedback to help further clarify our argument.

#### Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

#### References

1. Tjaden P, Thoennes N. Full report of the prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice/Centers for Disease Control, 2000. NCJ-183781.
2. Thompson RS, Bonomi AE, Anderson M, et al. Intimate partner violence: Prevalence, types, and chronicity in adult women. *Am J Prev Med* 2006;30:447-457.
3. Bonomi AE, Anderson ML, Rivara FP, Thompson RS. Health outcomes in women with physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence exposure. *J Womens Health* 2007;16:987-997.
4. Bonomi AE, Thompson RS, Anderson ML, et al. Intimate partner violence and women's physical, mental, and social functioning. *Am J Prev Med* 2006;30:458-466.
5. Bonomi AE, Anderson ML, Reid RJ, Rivara FP, Carrell D, Thompson RS. Medical and psychosocial diagnoses in women with a history of intimate partner violence. *Arch Intern Med* 2009;169:1692-1697.
6. Coker AL, Davis KE, Arias I, et al. Physical and mental health effects of intimate partner violence for men and women. *Am J Prev Med* 2002;23:260-268.
7. Campbell J, Jones AS, Dienemann J, et al. Intimate partner violence and physical health consequences. *Arch Intern Med* 2002;162:1157-1163.
8. Campbell JC, Lewandowski LA. Mental and physical health effects of intimate partner violence on women and children. *Psychiatr Clin North Am* 1997;20:353-374.
9. Campbell JC. Health consequences of intimate partner violence. *Lancet* 2002;359:1331-1336.
10. McFarlane J, Malecha A, Gist J, et al. Intimate partner sexual assault against women and associated victim substance use, suicidality, and risk factors for femicide. *Issues Ment Health Nurs* 2005;26:953-967.
11. McFarlane J, Malecha A, Watson K, et al. Intimate partner sexual assault against women: Frequency, health consequences, and treatment outcomes. *Obstet Gynecol* Jan 2003; 105:99-108.
12. Bronfenbrenner U. The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
13. Borgia DN. Twilight: The glamorization of abuse, codependency, and white privilege. *J Pop Cult* 2011;1-21.
14. Collins VE, Carmody DC. Deadly love: Images of dating violence in the "Twilight Saga". *Attila* 2011;26:382-394.
15. Vidal MA, Clemente M, Espinosa P. Types of media violence and degree of acceptance in under-18s. *Aggress Behav* 2003;29:281-292.
16. Miller LE, Grabell A, Thomas A, Bermann E, Graham SA. The associations between community violence, television violence, intimate partner violence, parent-child aggression, and aggression in sibling relationships of a sample of pre-schoolers. *Psychol Violence* 2012;2:165-178.
17. Sargent JD, Heatherington TF, Ahrens MB, Dalton MA, Tickle JJ, Beach ML. Adolescent exposure to extremely violent movies. *J Adolesc Health* 2002;31:449-454.

## ABUSE AND HARM IN FIFTY SHADES

9

"...I'm mad because you never mentioned Georgia to me. I'm mad because you went drinking with that guy [Joel] who tried to seduce you when you were drunk and who left you when you were ill with an almost a complete stranger. What kind of friend does that? And I'm mad and aroused because you closed your legs on me..." (p. 348)

Anastasia resists: "Please don't hit me...I don't want you to spank me, not here, not now. Please don't" (p. 347). Surrounding the ensuing sex, Christian intimidates through clenched teeth: "This [her vagina] is mine...all mine...do you understand?" and "This will be quick, and it's for me, not for you. Do you understand? Don't come or I will spank you" (p. 349).

In summary, the three sex scenes we reviewed here illustrated themes that were consistent throughout the other sex scenes in the novel—notably the use of alcohol to impair Anastasia's consent and the use of intimidation/pressure typically accompanied by Christian's genuine anger over "some transgression" Anastasia makes or concerns that things are not going his way, including her resistance to his sexual practices. Christian's use of alcohol prior to most discussions of the BDSM contract terms is also a means of compromising Anastasia's consent; again, the CDC's definition of sexual violence highlights the role of alcohol to impair consent and intimidation/pressure to coerce participation in unwanted sexual activities.<sup>63</sup> Further, BDSM experts acknowledge that substance abuse negates consent, and sexual boundaries should be respected at all times.<sup>66</sup> Finally, in a relationship fraught with pervasive emotional abuse (stalking, intimidation, isolation, and humiliation), sexual interactions by definition are coerced; in real-world violent couples with similar underlying emotional abuse, rape/sexual assault is a common occurrence.<sup>68</sup>

## Discussion

We systematically analyzed *Fifty Shades of Grey* to elucidate patterns consistent with national definitions of intimate partner violence and associated reactions known to occur in abused women. Consistent with the Centers for Disease Control's definitions of intimate partner violence, emotional abuse was present in nearly every interaction, including stalking, intimidation, isolation, and humiliation; these strategies collectively served to control Anastasia.<sup>63</sup> Sexual violence was also pervasive, including using alcohol and intimidation/pressure.<sup>63</sup> Anastasia experienced the range of reactions described by abused women in Smith's in-depth study, including perceived threat, stressful managing, yearning, altered identity, disempowerment, and entrapment.<sup>60-62</sup>

The IPV patterns in *Fifty Shades* are consistent with those typically observed in violent couples, including the use of violence to control relationship outcomes,<sup>69,57,59,64-71</sup> violent couples' struggle to manage the tension between violence and a simultaneous desire for intimacy, "normal" connection, and hope for the future;<sup>64,53,60,64</sup> underlying stressful managing that victims engage in to reduce tension;<sup>60,61,72</sup> the use of violence during sexual and birth control interactions, including manipulations that occur simultaneously with anger/rage and minimizing the abuse;<sup>68,73-75</sup> and victims' attempts to "leave" the relationship.<sup>70</sup> Some of these patterns (e.g., hope for "normal" connection, managing to reduce tension) may be characteristic of all relationships (violent or nonviolent); yet, abusers' minimization of gross acts of harm (e.g., beating) is a

defining feature of relationships where there is underlying abuse.<sup>68,73-75</sup> In Bonomi's analysis of chronically violent couples,<sup>68</sup> minimizations include not allowing the victim to talk about the abuse (e.g., shifting the conversational topic or instructing the victim to "stop talking"); resisting responsibility (Victim: "They think my cheek is broken"; Abuser: "I'm really sorry, but I didn't even do anything"); denying the credibility of the victim's story ("I didn't push you like you think I pushed you"); and reminding the victim that she was to blame for the violence. We observed a similar dynamic in Christian and Anastasia's relationship, such as when Christian minimized Anastasia's feelings of being "demeaned, debased, and abused" (p. 292) by suggesting that a real submissive would "embrace these feelings, deal with them, for [him]" (p. 293). Another interpretation could be that Anastasia did enjoy the "abuse" within the couple's BDSM interactions and was simply struggling with uncomfortable feelings of being part of a BDSM relationship; while aspects of this interpretation could be true, Anastasia's feelings as documented throughout our analysis clearly indicate she felt a sense of genuine danger in the relationship. Moreover, to interpret Anastasia's feelings as not being ready for BDSM toes a dangerous line of classic victim blaming, where the tables are turned back on the victim as playing a central role in instigating abuse.<sup>64</sup>

While we did not set out to analyze other symptoms in Christian and Anastasia's relationship that are consistent with those seen in violent couples, our findings nonetheless revealed remarkable similarities. Namely, chronic substance abuse, jealousy, and underlying mental health issues, which are hallmarks of abusive relationships,<sup>5,6,19,59,77-81</sup> are also prominent in Christian and Anastasia's relationship. For example, jealousy, which has been shown as a crucial "tipping point" for violence in couples,<sup>59</sup> similarly prompted Christian's anger and intimidation. Alcohol use was pervasive, with Christian applying pressure to drink alcohol in sexual and nonsexual settings, and Anastasia choosing to use alcohol to manage her anxiety ("I reach for my wine in desperation" p. 343). Christian manipulates Anastasia by using information about past childhood trauma (underlying mental health issues),<sup>59</sup> to appeal to her sympathy<sup>56</sup> and to condition her to respond to his needs—a classic move used by chronically violent domestic violence offenders to entrap women in relationships.<sup>58</sup> Other mental health issues are evidenced by Christian and Anastasia's significant fears over losing each other, another hallmark of abusive relationships, where partners commonly experience unusually high levels of anxiety.<sup>49,53,56,71</sup>

Despite the pervasive abuse patterns we uncovered in our analysis, popular reviews have suggested the book is liberating for women's sexuality, providing women with an "opportunity" to openly experience erotica in an otherwise hyper-repressed culture.<sup>51</sup> Our analysis did not set out to unravel the validity of the popular claim that the book is liberating for women's sexuality. However, what our analysis sheds light on is the following: While Anastasia is depicted as experiencing "pleasure" during some of the couple's sexual interactions, our analysis shows she is simultaneously confused and terrified that she will be hurt in such interactions, and she yearns for a "normal" relationship; in addition, Anastasia's consent in the sexual activities is coerced through the use of alcohol and intimidation/pressure. Recent research has shown that among people whose BDSM interactions went

60. Smith PH, Tessaro I, Earp JA. Women's experience with battering: A conceptualization from qualitative research. *Womens Health Issues* 1995;5:173-182.
61. Smith PH, Smith JB, Earp JA. Beyond the measurement trap: A reconstructed conceptualization and measurement of woman battering. *Psychol Women Q* 1999;23:177-193.
62. Smith PH, Earp JA, DeVellis R. Measuring battering: Development of the Women's Experience with Battering (WEB) scale. *Womens Health* 1995;1:273-288.
63. Saltzman LE, Fanslow JL, McMahon P, Shelley GA. Intimate partner violence surveillance: Uniform definitions and recommended data elements. Version 1.0. Atlanta: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999.
64. Carotta CL, Lee M, Bonomi AE, Sweeney J, Schiavonne S, Blatnik S. "I am hoping for a miracle" and "I am too": Hopes expressed between victims and offenders following incarceration for domestic violence. Paper presented at the Hayes Graduate Research Forum, The Ohio State University, March 1, 2013.
65. Straus A, Corbin J. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998.
66. Comfort M, Grinstead O, McCartney K, Bourgois P, Knight K. "You can't do nothing in this damn place": Sex and intimacy among couples with an incarcerated male partner. *J Sex Res* 2005;42:3-12.
67. Cutler B. Partner selection, power dynamics, and sexual bargaining in self-defined BDSM couples. San Francisco: The Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, 2003.
68. Bergen RK, Bukovec P. Men and intimate partner rape: characteristics of men who sexually abuse their partner. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 2006;21(10):1375-1394.
69. Avakame EF. Intergenerational transmission of violence, self-control, and conjugal violence: A comparative analysis of physical violence and psychological aggression. *Violence Vict* 1998;13:301-316.
70. Avakame EF. Intergenerational transmission of violence and psychological aggression against wives. *Can J Behav Sci* 1998;30:193-202.
71. Bond SB, Bond M. Attachment styles and violence within couples. *J Nerv Ment Dis* 2004;192:857-863.
72. Walker LEA. *The battered woman syndrome*, 2nd ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2000.
73. Miller E, Decker MR, McCauley HL. Pregnancy coercion, intimate partner violence and unintended pregnancy. *Contraception* 2010;81:31-6322.
74. Logan TK, Cule JR, Shannon LA. A mixed-methods examination of sexual coercion and degradation among women in violent relationships who do and do not report forced sex. *Violence Vict* 2007;22:71-94.
75. Boucher S, Lemelin J, McNicoll M. Marital rape and relational trauma. *Sexologies* 2009;18:95-97.
76. Koepsell JK, Kernic MA, Holt VL. Factors that influence battered women to leave their abusive relationships. *Violence Vict* 2006;21:131-147.
77. Shannon L, Logan T, Cole J, Walker R. An examination women's alcohol use and partner victimization experiences among women with protective orders. *Subst Use Misuse* 2008;43:1110-1128.
78. Barnett OW, Martinez TE, Bluestein BW. Jealousy and romantic attachment in maritally violent and nonviolent men. *J Interpers Violence* 1995;10:473-486.
79. Fals-Stewart W, Golden J, Schumacher JA. Intimate partner violence and substance abuse: A longitudinal day-to-day examination. *Addict Behav* 2003;28:1555-1574.
80. Fals-Stewart W, Leonard KE, Birchler GR. The occurrence of male-to-female intimate partner violence on days of men's drinking: The moderating effects of antisocial personality disorder. *J Consult Clin Psych* 2005;73:239-248.
81. Holtzworth-Munroe A, Stuart GL, Hutchinson C. Violent versus nonviolent husbands: Differences in attachment patterns, dependency, and jealousy. *J Fam Psychol* 1997;1997:314-331.
82. Haidt J, Hersh MA. Sexuality morality: The cultures and emotions of conservatives and liberals. *J Appl Soc Psychol* 2001;31:191-221.

Address correspondence to:

Amy E. Bonomi, PhD, MPH  
 Department of Human Development and Family Science  
 The Ohio State University  
 1797 Neil Avenue  
 135 Campbell Hall  
 Columbus, Ohio 43210

E-mail: bonomi.1@osu.edu

## ABUSE AND HARM IN FIFTY SHADES

11

18. Zimmerman FJ, Christakis DA. Associations between content types of early media exposure and subsequent attentional problems. *Pediatrics* 2007;120:986-992.
19. Christakis DA, Zimmerman FJ. Violent television viewing during preschool is associated with antisocial behavior during school age. *Pediatrics* 2007;120(5):993-999.
20. Haynes J. Exposing domestic violence in country music videos. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009.
21. Bretthauer B, Zimmerman TS, Banning JH. A feminist analysis of popular music: power over, objectification of, and violence against women. *J Fem Fam Ther* 2006;18:2006.
22. Fogel CA, Quinlan A. Lady Gaga and feminism: A critical debate. *Cross-Cult Commun* 2011;7:184-188.
23. Studios E. Love the Way You Lie. August 9, 2010.
24. Media CoCa. Impact of music, music lyrics, and music videos on children and youth. *Pediatrics* 2009;124:1488-1494.
25. Dines G. Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.
26. DeKeseredy WS, Olason P. Adult pornography, male peer support, and violence against women: The contribution of the "dark side" of the internet. In: Vargas Martin M, Garcia-Ruiz MA, Edwards A, eds. Technology for facilitating humanity and combating social deviations: Interdisciplinary perspectives. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2011:34-50.
27. James EL. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. New York: Random House, 2011.
28. James EL. *Fifty Shades Freed*. New York: Random House, 2012.
29. James EL. *Fifty Shades Darker*. New York: Random House, 2011.
30. Green MC, Brock TC, Kaufman GF. Understanding media enjoyment: The role of transportation into narrative worlds. *Commun Theory* 2006;14:311-327.
31. Strange JJ, Leung CC. How anecdotal accounts in news and fiction can influence judgments of a social problem's urgency, causes, and cures. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 1999;25:436-449.
32. Green MC, Brock TC. Transportation-imagery model of narrative persuasion. In: Green MC, Strange JJ, Brock TC, eds. Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002:315-341.
33. Vaughn LA, Hesse SJ, Petkova Z, Trudeau L. "This story is right on": The impact of regulatory fit on narrative engagement and persuasion. *Eur J Soc Psychol* 2008;39:447-456.
34. Green MC, Brock TC. The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2000;79:701-721.
35. Foerster HN. Banned in the USA: A reference guide to book censorship in schools and public libraries. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002.
36. Robbins LS. Censorship and the American library. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996.
37. Boyer PS. Purity in print: Book censorship in America from the gilded age to the computer age. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
38. Meyer S. *Twilight*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
39. Meyer S. *New Moon*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006.
40. Meyer S. *Midnight Sun*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008.
41. Lush T. "Fifty Shades of Grey" book now banned by libraries in 3 states. 2013. Published online on May 9, 2012. Available at: [www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/09/book-banned-fifty-shades-of-grey\\_n\\_1503949.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/09/book-banned-fifty-shades-of-grey_n_1503949.html) Accessed April 30, 2013.
42. Cooper S. *BDSM: Fifty shades of grey unplugged*. Psychol Today: Published online on March 6, 2012. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sex-estem/201203/bdsm-fifty-shades-grey-unplugged>.
43. *BDSM*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BDSM>. Accessed January 7, 2013.
44. Sagarin BJ, Cutler B, Cutler N, Lawler-Sagarin KA, Matuszewich L. Hormonal changes and couple bonding in consensual sadomasochistic activity. *Arch Sexl Behav* 2009;38:186-200.
45. Meeker C. Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM). Paper presented at Tenth Annual College of Education and GSN Research Conference, Florida International University, Miami, FL, April 23, 2011.
46. Barker M, Lantaffi A, Gupta C. Kinky clients, kinky counselling? The challenges and potentials of BDSM. In: Moon L, ed. *Feeling queer or queer feelings: Radical approaches to counselling sex, sexualities and genders*. London: Routledge, 2007:106-124.
47. Barker M, Gupta C, Lantaffi A. The power of play: The potentials and pitfalls in healing narratives of BDSM. In: Langdridge D, Barker M, eds. *Safe, sane and consensual: Contemporary perspectives on sadomasochism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007:197-216.
48. Weiss M. *Techniques of pleasure: BDSM and the circuits of sexuality*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2011.
49. Allison CJ, Bartholomew K, Maysseless O, Dutton DG. Love as a battlefield: Dynamics in couples identified for male partner violence. *J Fam Issues* 2008;29:125-150.
50. Wolfe DA, Wekerle C, Scott K, Straatman AL, Grasley C. Predicting abuse in adolescent dating relationships over 1 year: The role of child maltreatment and trauma. *J Abnorm Psychol* 2004;113:406-415.
51. Diamanturos T, Cosentino CE, Tysinger PD, Tysinger JA. Theoretical perspectives of male sexual abuse: conceptualization of a case study. *J Child Sex Abuse* 2012;21:131-154.
52. Phanichrat T, Townshend JM. Coping strategies used by survivors of childhood sexual abuse on the journey to recovery. *J Child Sex Abuse* 2010;19:62-78.
53. Widom CS, DuMont K, Czaja SJ. A prospective investigation of major depressive disorder and comorbidity in abused and neglected children grown up. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 2007;64:49-56.
54. On the Scene: *Fifty Shades* author E.L. James on "Katie". <http://insidetv.ew.com/2012/09/17/e-l-james-katie-couric>.
55. Bartholomew K, Allison CJ. An attachment perspective on abusive dynamics in intimate relationships. In: Mikulincer M, Goodman GS, eds. *Dynamics of romantic love: Attachment, caregiving, and sex*. New York: Guilford, 2006:102-127.
56. Bartle SE, Rosen K. Individuation and relationship violence. *Am J Fam Therapy* 1994;22:222-236.
57. Henderson AJZ, Bartholomew K, Trinke SJ, Kwong MJ. When loving means hurting: An exploration of attachment and intimate abuse in a community sample. *J Family Violence* 2005;20:219-230.
58. Bonomi AE, Gangamma R, Locke C, Katafiasz H, Martin D. "Meet me at the hill where we used to park": Interpersonal processes associated with victim recantation. *Soc Sci Med* 2011;73:1054-1061.
59. Nemeth J, Bonomi AE, Lee M, Ludwin J. Sexual infidelity as the trigger: an events analysis of intimate partner violence. *J Womens Health* 2012;21:942-949.